

Older Workers (1954)      H. H. H. 19

# (Business Management Aids) no. 15

BUREAU OF BUSINESS MANAGEMENT · COLLEGE OF COMMERCE AND BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION  
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS · URBANA

*In order to receive copies of this publication or other publications by the Bureau of Business Management, send your name and address to the Bureau of Business Management, University of Illinois, Urbana, Illinois. Please indicate the specific nature of your business.*

3,000 OLDER WORKERS AND THEIR JOB EFFECTIVENESS

Robert L. Peterson  
Bureau of Business Management  
University of Illinois

About 65% of America's working population is engaged in industrial, retailing, office, and managerial tasks.\* While everyone is aware that these millions of workers are growing older each day, there has long been a question in the minds of business administrators and others as to how older employees in these tasks compare in work efficiency with average younger employees. Because there has been so much talk about the effectiveness of older workers, and so few facts offered in support, several well-known midwestern organizations were asked to cooperate with the Bureau of Business Management of the University of Illinois in a survey on the effectiveness of older industrial, retailing, office, and managerial personnel.

This is a composite report which describes findings elicited through three separate studies, covering a total of 3,077 personnel sixty years of age and older (78% male, 22% female) in 81 organizations (see appendix). The first study was undertaken when a group of retailers raised a question concerning the possible use of older people to meet personnel shortages in retail stores. To obtain information a rating form was developed and supervisors in 22 retail stores evaluated 527 older personnel. The findings were so revealing that a second study was conducted, covering 1,525 older industrial personnel in 39 industries. Later, a third study was conducted covering 1,025 older office and managerial workers in 20 organizations. Each of the three studies has been published and copies of the individual reports are available upon request to the Bureau of Business Management, University of Illinois, Urbana. Incidentally, there is a great similarity in the findings of each of these three studies, indicating that the performance of older personnel is not greatly affected by the kind of work in which the employees are engaged.

**Survey Procedure.** The studies were initiated by asking top executives in cooperating organizations to determine how many employees they had on their payrolls who were sixty years of age and older. It was found that older workers constituted approximately five percent of the total employees in these organizations. An appropriate number of employee rating forms was then sent to each organization for distribution to supervisors. A copy of the rating form is shown in Figure 1. Supervisors in these organizations were then asked to rate each of their workers who was sixty years of age and older. In addition, they were admonished to "Answer all questions honestly and realistically," and were informed that "Ratings are entirely confidential." After supervisors had completed their evaluations the rating forms were sent to the University of Illinois where the results were tabulated on IBM machines.

\* According to the 1950 U.S. Census Summary of Population, the total employed population is 56 millions, of which about 20 million are in industrial work (operatives and craftsmen), 4 million are in retailing work (sales), and 12 million are in managerial, clerical, and kindred tasks.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
LIBRARY  
INDUSTRIAL  
RELATIONS  
LIBRARY  
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
BERKELEY

DEC 10 1954

It will be observed that in obtaining data concerning older worker effectiveness complete reliance was placed on supervisory opinion. This was because it appears that fully objective, laboratory-controlled answers cannot be obtained with reference to the effectiveness of large groups of older personnel in different types of work. It is believed that confidential evaluations prepared of older personnel by their immediate supervisors are the best indices obtainable of older worker competence and performance.

**Age of Workers.** The average age of personnel in the survey group was approximately sixty-four years. The survey group was distributed into age categories as follows:

Age Groups	60-64	65-69	70-74	75 & over
Number of employees	1,940	821	225	91
Percent of total	63%	27%	7%	3%

The high percentage of employees in the 60-64 age group is doubtless due to the fact that in approximately one-half of the cooperating organizations there were policies in effect requiring all employees to retire at sixty-five or shortly thereafter.

There were several employees in the survey group who were eighty years of age. One was a tool worker who had been with his present firm for fifty-nine years. He was given an overall rating of "Good" and was reported by his supervisor to be capable of rendering at least two more years of satisfactory service. His weaknesses were reported to be "Declining eyesight and a tendency to fatigue more easily." Nevertheless, he was reported to have a lower record of absenteeism and to be more dependable than average younger workers.

Another employee of eighty was a man employed in an insurance company 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 average 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 working for an indefinite period.

**Length of Service.** It might be expected that most of the older workers in the survey group had been with their present organizations for most of their working careers. However it was disclosed that only 24% had spent thirty or more years with their present organization. Surprisingly, 38% of these older workers had been with their present organizations *less than ten years*.

These figures suggest that postwar shortages in the supply of available 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. That employers were not unwise in pursuing this course is reflected in the specific findings of the survey which follow:

**Over-all Performance.** As shown on the rating form, all employees 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. The ratings assigned by supervisors to the 3,077 older personnel in the survey group were distributed as follows:

Excellent	Very Good	Good	Fair	Poor
14%	28%	38%	18%	2%

University of Illinois  
Business Management Service

Company \_\_\_\_\_

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* weaknesses (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

Figure No. 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 & older
Excellent	14%	15%	12%	14%
Very Good	28%	27%	37%	22%
Good	39%	35%	33%	43%
Fair	17%	20%	15%	20%
Poor	2%	3%	3%	1%

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. While 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 were rated by their supervisors as being much less prone to absenteeism than average younger personnel, as shown by the following ratings:

Reported to have less absenteeism	66%
Reported to have about the same absenteeism	25%
Reported to have more absenteeism	9%

There were no important differences in the ratings assigned to employees in the four age categories (60-64, 65-69, 70-74, 75 & over). Actually, the survey results show a very slight decrease in absenteeism paralleling advancing age.

**Dependability.** Older personnel were rated by their supervisors as having a high level of dependability. Note the following data reporting that fully one-half of these senior workers were regarded by their supervisors as being more dependable than average younger workers:

Reported to be more dependable	51%
Reported to be as dependable	43%
Reported to be less dependable	6%

No important differences were found in the dependability ratings assigned to employees in the four age categories. Those in the far-advanced age groups were given ratings on dependability which compared favorably with those assigned to employees in less-advanced age groups.

**Judgment.** Only the office and managerial group (about one-third of the total) was rated on the element of judgment. Supervisors rated older workers, in comparison with younger workers, as follows:

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

Again, no important differences were noted in the ratings assigned to employees in the four age categories. Good judgment appears to be an enduring quality which may persist into far-advanced years.

**Work Quality.** All older workers except those in the retailing group were rated by supervisors on the quality of their work, in comparison with average younger workers:

Reported to have a better work quality	34%
Reported about the same	59%
Reported to have poorer work quality	7%

A check of ratings assigned to employees in the four age groups reveals no evidence of a decline in work quality paralleling advancing years.

**Work Volume.** A major criterion in the evaluation of an employee is productivity. In this survey the various supervisors were asked to compare the work volume of older personnel with that of average younger workers:

Reported to have a higher work volume	24%
Reported to have a volume about the same	56%
Reported to have a lower work volume	20%

There was a slight decline in work volume paralleling advancing years. Nevertheless, in the oldest age category (employees 75 & over), 10% were reported to have a higher work volume, 59% were reported to have a volume about the same, and 31% were reported to have a lower volume of work than average younger personnel. In other words, more than two-thirds of the oldest personnel in the survey group were rated as having a work volume as good as, if not better than, average younger personnel.

**Getting Along with Others.** Supervisors rated each older worker on his human relationships, in comparison with average younger workers:

Reported to get along better with others	32%
Reported to get along about the same	59%
Reported to get along less well with others	9%

No important differences were found in the ratings assigned to employees in the four age categories, thus providing no support for the traditional belief that workers present problems in human relations the older they become.

**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 supervisors believed older personnel would be able to give their present jobs. As shown on the rating form, supervisors were asked to write "Indefinite" if an employee showed no signs of weakness or decline which suggested a specific limit on the number of years he would be able to continue working. The survey results showed that 26% of the group were rated as "Indefinite." Of the remainder, the average individual was estimated to have before him approximately five and a half years of additional service.

**Age-connected Weaknesses.** As shown on the rating form, supervisors were asked to list any weaknesses in employees which they regarded as age-connected. They were not to list unfavorable qualities, such as inaccurate work or stubbornness, unless they considered these characteristics to be the result of advancing age. It was startling to find that 69% of these employees were rated "None" - indicating that they had no apparent age-connected weaknesses. Of the remainder, the weaknesses noted in order of number were *general slowing down, poor health, psychological difficulties (such as forgetfulness), impaired eyesight, and impaired hearing.* While the enumerated weaknesses are those commonly associated with older people in general, it is noteworthy that supervisors attributed these weaknesses to less than one-third of the older employees in this survey group.

**Influence of Supervisor's Age on Ratings.** To investigate the possibility of an age bias, the age of rating supervisors was compared with the ratings on over-all performance which supervisors assigned to their older workers. Contrary to the long-standing belief that older supervisors may tend to think more charitably of older workers than do younger supervisors, the survey results show a startling absence of any relationship between age of supervisor and ratings. It was found that supervisors in each age group rated their older employees with remarkable similarity.

### Summary

The findings of this study are highly favorable to older personnel. However, the reader is cautioned to infer no 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 inference, of course, is not sound because it fails to consider that the older personnel in this survey group represent a highly selective group in several senses - only those with the best apparent capabilities were selected for employment, only those with high motivation have continued to work, and only the fittest have survived dismissal.

The survey results also suggest that people sixty years of age and over should be selected for employment in preference to younger people. However, this inference is also unsound because it overlooks the necessity in business organizations of employing 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 must ultimately leave the organization.

The findings of the survey do, however, support the following conclusions:

1. Supervisors in business and industry consider *a majority* of their workers sixty years of age and older to be as good as, or superior to, average younger workers with reference to absenteeism, dependability, judgment, work quality, work volume, and human relations.
2. There is no specific point of age at which employees become unproductive. Supervisors indicate by their ratings that satisfactory work performance may continue into the eighth decade.
3. Supervisors indicate by their ratings that organizations which require employees to retire at a certain age, such as sixty-five, are losing a great deal of valuable productivity.
4. Supervisors believe that about one-quarter of their workers sixty years of age and older will be able to continue working indefinitely.
5. Supervisors believe that *a majority* of their workers sixty years of age and older have no apparent and specific age-connected weaknesses.
6. Supervisors have had generally favorable results with new employees recruited from the ranks of the middle-aged. The fact that 38% 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.
7. There is no indication that the age of the supervisor has anything to do with the favorableness of ratings assigned to older workers.

This survey into the effectiveness of older personnel suggests that any unfavorable attitudes which are harbored about the usefulness and capacity of senior employees 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 management 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 average younger workers.

## APPENDIX

Grateful acknowledgement is made to Prof. H. S. Hall, Bureau of Business Management, who participated in organizing these studies, and to the following companies whose cooperation made these studies possible:

A. E. Staley Manufacturing Company, Decatur	Illinois Clay Products Company, Joliet
Aldens, Inc., Chicago	International Harvester Company, Canton Works, Canton
Allith-Prouty, Inc., Danville	International Shoe Company, Springfield
The American Insurance Company, Rockford	J. D. Roszell Company, Peoria
American-Marietta Company, Kankakee	J. L. Clark Manufacturing Company, Rockford
American Steel and Wire Division, United States Steel Corporation, Joliet	Joseph Kuhn and Company, Champaign
Bankers Life and Casualty Company, Chicago	Kaufman's, Inc., Champaign
Barrett Hardware Company, Joliet	Kellogg Drake Company, Galesburg
Bergner's, Peoria	Kraft Foods Company, Chicago
Block and Kuhl Company, Danville	Le Tourneau-Westinghouse Company, Peoria
Block and Kuhl Company, Galesburg	Linn and Scruggs, Decatur
Block and Kuhl Company, Peoria	Livingston's, Bloomington
Blue Cross Plan for Hospital Care, Chicago	Meis Brothers, Inc., Danville
Brown Shoe Company, Mattoon	Modern Woodmen of America, Rock Island
Chambers, Bering, Quinlan Company, Decatur	Mueller Company, Decatur
Champion Machinery Company, Joliet	Myers Brothers, Springfield
The Charles V. Weise Company, Rockford	Norge Division, Borg-Warner Corp., Range Plant, Effingham
City National Bank and Trust Company, Chicago	The Northern Trust Company, Chicago
Coffing Hoist Company, Danville	Oliver Corporation, Shelbyville
Continental Casualty Company, Chicago	Osgood and Sons, Inc., Decatur
Continental Illinois National Bank and Trust Company of Chicago	Perfection Gear Company, Harvey
David Bradley Mfg. Works, Bradley	Petty's Department Store, Effingham
Department of Public Welfare (General Office), Springfield	Pillsbury Mills, Inc., Springfield
The Diversey Corporation, Chicago	P. O. Fogerson, Villa Grove
Electric Steel Foundry Company, Danville	Progress Mfg. Co., Inc., Arthur
Equipment Steel Products, Division of Union Asbestos and Rubber Company, Blue Island	The Pullman Company, Chicago
The Fair, Chicago	Reuben H. Donnelley Corporation, Chicago
The First National Bank of Chicago	Robert Holmes & Bros., Inc., Danville
Flamingo Products, Inc., Danville	Robeson's Department Store, Champaign
Gar Wood Industries, Inc., Mattoon	R. F. Herndon and Company, Springfield
Globe Department Store, Waukegan	Sam Wolf Broom Company, Mattoon
Gothard Manufacturing Co., Springfield	Sta-Rite Ginnie-Lou, Inc., Shelbyville
Granite City Steel Company, Granite City	State Farm Insurance Companies, Bloomington
Great Lakes Screw Corporation, Chicago	Time, Inc., Chicago
Hardware Mutuals, Stevens Point, Wisconsin	United States Steel Corporation, Joliet
Hegler Zinc Company, Danville	W. A. Alexander & Co., Chicago
Herman Nelson Division, American Air Filter Company, Inc., Moline	Wagner Malleable Iron Company, Decatur
Hiram Walker & Sons, Inc., Peoria	W. H. Roland Company, Bloomington
Hyster Company, Danville	W. Lewis and Company, Champaign
	Washington National Insurance Company, Evanston
	Woodbury Book Store, Danville
	Worthen Dry Goods Company, Hoopeston