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The Many Ages of the Workforce

Mining untapped talent pools for great permanent hires.

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Introduction

Mining untapped talent pools for great permanent hires

At Adecco, we believe in talent, not labels. We connect thousands of people who are at-risk in the labour market with purposeful jobs each year.

With the pandemic prompting people to re-evaluate their careers, employers must capitalise on the Great Resignation to reimagine the composition of their workforces. It's time to rethink outdated hiring processes, reach out to under-represented populations, and capture thousands of highly skilled and hitherto overlooked talents for permanent roles.

This series highlights the very real, long-term benefits that workers from underserved communities who might once have been excluded from work bring to companies.

In this paper, **The Many Ages of the Workforce**, we share our thinking on how workers from under-represented age groups can help employers solve some of their toughest permanent hiring challenges. We offer our tips on recruiting and onboarding people from these demographics, and we explain how you can ensure that people of all ages can thrive at your company.

"It is our core mission to make the future work for everyone. "

We're all about people. Permanently.

Job Title

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Whatever your permanent recruitment needs, Adecco is here to help. We are, after all, #AllAboutPeople. Permanently.

Looking for exceptional permanent hires whilst also increasing your Diversity & Inclusion? Adecco is here to help you uncover and nurture the wealth in hidden talent pools.

❝ It is our core mission to make the future work for everyone. We believe in talent, not labels, and we know that differences are not deficits. ❞

The impact of ageism on workers

Forward-thinking companies across the globe are trying to develop more diverse, inclusive workplaces. Much of the time, these efforts focus on factors such as race/ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, but age is also an important aspect of the overall diversity and inclusion picture: and one that is likely to grow in importance as the average age of workers rises across geographies.

This is partly a consequence of rising retirement ages. In the United States, the Social Security retirement age is rising to 67 for everyone born after 1960; in the United Kingdom, the state pension age is set to rise to 68 by 2046. Similar policies are being enacted across the world as developed economies grapple with falling birth rates.

So, older people are a growing proportion of the working population, and this growth is set to accelerate over the coming years and decades. But are recruiters and employers ready for this change? The data suggests there is still much work to do.

- In the United States, the proportion of workers aged over 55 doubled in the 25 years between 1992 and 2017. This cohort will account for 25% of the American workforce by 2024.

- Almost half (44%) of applicants aged 45 and over admitted to altering their age on their CV to avoid being judged on their age.

- 64% of older adults say they have seen or experienced ageism in the workplace.

- A full third (33%) of workers who expect to lose their job in the next 12 months cite their age as a factor.

- 54% of older workers say they have limited access to training at work, but 85% are ready to learn new skills.

- Age correlates positively with worker engagement, with workers aged 50 and over having the highest levels of engagement in the workplace.

Although most people's thoughts turn to older demographics when the issue of ageism is raised, it's important to note that ageism affects everybody. It is telling that considerably less research exists on the impact of ageism on younger people, but that does not mean that employers and recruiters can ignore this dimension to the issue. The WHO's 2021 global report on ageism noted that "Although no reviews have systematically assessed how ageism affects younger populations in the workplace, a recent scoping review found increasing evidence that ageism towards this group manifests itself most markedly once they are employed, especially in terms of pay and benefits".

The media stereotype of "lazy, workshy millennials" is familiar to the point of cliché, and so widespread that it may be tempting to view it as harmless — but evidence suggests such stereotyping has a real-world impact in the workplace. A study in 2021 by Stephané P. Francioli and Michael S. North for the Journal of Experimental Psychology pointed out that

"Beyond the negative image propagated in the media, young adults report facing condescension in speech and unfair workplace treatment due to their age, suggesting that the social cognitions targeting this group may have deleterious, real-world implications for its members".

Attracting talent of all ages

The most pressing challenge for employers looking to build more age-inclusive workforces is knowing where to begin. The good news is that many of the measures you take to counter discrimination based on other factors can be applied to age-related discrimination too. The vital first step in all cases is to make sure your hiring process makes every qualified candidate feel encouraged — and empowered — to apply. You can achieve that by taking a customer-experience approach to candidates and new hires. Here's how to do it:

Build an age-inclusive employer brand

Your employee value proposition should be attractive to people of all ages. Ensure your candidate-facing materials and company imagery feature people of all ages. Make sure old and young employees alike are included when sourcing staff testimonials, photographs, and quotes for these materials.

Consider the language and specifications in your job descriptions

The job description will give candidates an impression of what it's like to work for your organisation, so avoid language that can make your workplace seem to favour one demographic over another. Stating that a role is to be filled by a "rock star" worker is likely to make older candidates feel they won't be considered for the position.

Don't place limits on experience

Demanding "five years of experience in a similar role" will ensure that you miss out on candidates who may be a perfect fit in every other regard. If your onboarding and training are of a high enough standard, is five years of experience necessary? At the other end of the scale, older, more experienced candidates may feel they'll be dismissed as overqualified if they have significantly more than five years of experience. When such experience is genuinely necessary, you can simply ask for "experience in a similar role" without specifying a number of years, and trust your recruitment, onboarding, and training processes to ensure a candidate is capable of doing the job.

Actively target underrepresented demographics

Think carefully about how and where you focus your recruitment efforts. For example, a social media campaign that prioritises Instagram and Tik-Tok is more likely to attract younger candidates, while older candidates are more likely to be using outlets such as LinkedIn and Facebook.

Implement "blind recruitment"

So-called "blind recruitment" processes, whereby personally identifying information is removed from candidates' CVs before consideration, have proven to be an effective way of minimising the impact of implicit biases.

Make careful use of referrals from staff in underrepresented age groups

Referrals have to be handled carefully from a diversity and inclusion perspective, as most people will refer someone who is similar to themselves. However, this can make referrals a powerful tool if you are aiming to increase the representation of a specific age group. Younger and older colleagues alike will be able to refer candidates from their age demographic.

Focus on skills and abilities, not software and technologies

Job descriptions often include a list of software and technologies that candidates should be familiar with, but in most cases, this is just a list of the technological tools currently in use at the organisation. Such lists can deter older candidates who have experience with different tools, as well as younger candidates who may not yet feel confident enough in their use. Most software and technological tools can be learnt in a matter of days, weeks, or months with the right training, so focus instead on candidates' core skills, which can take years to develop.

Rethink the importance of "cultural fit"

The "cultural fit" metric, intended to judge whether a candidate shares the values and goals of the hiring organisation, is often a poorly defined one that ends up reinforcing implicit biases. This is not to say that the company culture is unimportant, but rather that you should focus less on whether a candidate will conform with your existing company culture, and more on what they can add to it.

Set up a review panel

Review panels are a great way to build objectivity into what can be subjective decisions. Consider building a panel comprised of people from different departments, backgrounds, and ability levels to review candidate shortlists and selection processes for potential bias.

Defining ageism

Definitions of ageism vary between studies, often depending on the age groups the study covers. The WHO's definition is among the most straightforward and universally applicable, and is the one used for the purposes of this paper:

Ageism refers to the stereotypes (how we think), prejudice (how we feel) and discrimination (how we act) towards others or oneself based on age.

Addressing ageism in the workplace

Recruitment is a key area in which you need to address ageism, but it doesn't end there. Your efforts to tackle ageism in your recruitment processes will count for little if your workplace fails to be welcoming to people of all ages.

Here are some practical steps you can take to ensure people of all ages can thrive in your organisation:

Track age among your diversity metrics.

To identify and address ageism in your organisation, you need to track age as one of your diversity metrics – after all, you can't change something you don't measure. If you find you are struggling to retain employees in specific age groups, you can investigate further, adjust your policies as appropriate, and work to ensure everybody feels included and valued.

Include age in discrimination policies and awareness training.

As age is one of the less-discussed diversity metrics, it is often forgotten in discrimination policies and diversity and inclusion training programmes. Ensure that your relevant policies cover ageism alongside other forms of discrimination, and that all your relevant training includes a component on age-related discrimination. Employees may be discriminating against certain age groups without even realising it, and awareness training is a proven and effective tool in reducing such unintentional discrimination.

Survey employees anonymously.

Anonymous staff surveys can serve as a kind of early warning system for a range of potential issues, and ageism is no exception. Create a space for employees to tell you if they have experienced or witnessed ageism in your organisation, and most importantly, act on what they have to say.

Offer home office options.

The pandemic has shown the world that working from home does not mean a loss of productivity, and for younger cohorts, it has established working-from-home as the norm. Failing to offer such an option when it is feasible to do so is a sure-fire way to miss out on the strongest young talent, but not only them: research from the United Kingdom shows that flexible working options are a "deal-breaker" for 39% of older workers.

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Get management buy-in.

The WHO's 2021 global report on ageism referenced a study based on Japanese national survey data, which found that being subject to perceived age-related discrimination negatively affected job satisfaction among older men, but support from managers and colleagues decreased the impact of the perceived discrimination. Ensuring that employees of all ages feel they have support should they face age-related discrimination is not just a moral imperative, but also a way to strengthen your employees' commitment to the organisation.

Rethink mentoring.

Most mentoring relationships at work take the form of an older, more established employee being tasked with supporting a younger, new colleague to "show them the ropes". But this approach fails to take into account the most important factor – skills. Mentoring programmes should focus on ensuring any given employee has the skills needed to do their job as effectively as possible, regardless of age or length of tenure. The respective ages of a mentor and their mentee should not be a consideration.

Ensure training is accessible to all.

An employee's age should obviously never be a factor when making training available, but nor should the length of time they have been in their job. Even employees of many years' standing can benefit from training, even if some may be reluctant to pursue it. One way around this reluctance is to point out that less-established colleagues may benefit from the experience and knowledge of their longer-serving colleagues in a training setting.

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Whatever your permanent recruitment needs, Adecco is here to help.

We see **The Great Resignation** as an opportunity to revitalise tired, homogeneous workforces with an injection of fresh-thinking talent.

We develop programmes and pathways to reduce workforce barriers and strengthen employability through training.

We embrace workers across the whole diversity spectrum – and mine untapped talent pools that others ignore.

We reimagine outdated strategies across the entire recruitment process. We reject well-trodden paths.

People of all ages are capable of great work.
Let Adecco's Permanent Recruitment service help you hire them.

Our parent company, The Adecco Group, is part of The Valuable 500 initiative, alongside companies like Apple, Google, EY, and the BBC. It's a growing global movement dedicated to placing disability on the business leadership agenda.